

Book Reviews



David Benatar, *The Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. ISBN: 978-0-470-67451-2. US \$29.95

The idea that males might suffer disadvantage as a result of wrongful discrimination on the basis of sex (in a word, as a result of sexism) strikes many as wrongheaded, a proposal unworthy of further consideration. In certain respects, this sort of reaction is understandable. Historically, it has largely been females, not males, but (arguably) at the hands of males, who have been the victims of the most objectionable types of discrimination. From having been denied suffrage and education, to having been barred from certain types of free expression, to being constrained by oppressive gender roles, it is undeniable that women have suffered immensely as a direct and indirect result of wrongful discrimination. Indeed, it is not yet clear that women today are free from such discrimination or its lasting effects. Until recently, when they have been advanced, claims that men are likewise (though perhaps not to the same extent) the victims of wrongful sex discrimination have been relatively informal. When they have been raised, they have not been taken seriously. David Benatar, in his most recent book, *The Second Sexism*, seeks to change this fact. His book presents a challenge to those who scoff at the mention of sexism against males, by attempting to establish that males, in today's world, suffer as a result, often indirect, but sometimes direct, of sexism. Benatar's study proceeds in four main stages, each of them careful to separate the normative arguments from the descriptive facts, and each careful to avoid resorting to the kind of "emotive polemics" typical of so many contemporary treatments of gender issues (p. 20).

First, Benatar anticipates objections to the use of the concept of sexism to refer to wrongful discrimination against males. Many, he thinks, will object to the idea of a "second sexism" for con-

ceptual reasons. Sexism, according to these objectors, must refer to something systemic, it must involve “the domination of one sex by another” (p. 5), and such domination must be an *essential* feature of the discrimination at hand. But, the argument goes, it is clear that any existing discrimination against males does not meet such criteria. While Benatar thinks that we have good reason to reject such a definition of sexism (it might entail, for example, that Western democracies are post-sexist), this point is not central to his case. It is of sufficient moral importance, on his view, to establish that males suffer as a result of wrongful discrimination on the basis of sex. While he thinks that we ought to recognize this as sexism, he understands that some people will disagree. Such disagreement, he thinks, does not diminish the value of his project. He trusts that even those reluctant to deem such discrimination “sexism” will consider its existence worthy of moral opposition (p. 10).

Second, he considers a host of statistical disadvantages that attend being male across the globe. For example, males remain, almost universally, the only human beings forced to engage in military combat. Though practices involving mandatory military service are out of favor in contemporary liberal democracies, it is possible that they will be reinstated. (Indeed, arguments that the draft ought to be reinstated are increasingly popular.) Additionally, not all countries are liberal democracies, and in some (upwards of 80, according to Benatar), conscription is still practiced in some capacity (p. 27). Even where conscription is no longer practiced, males constitute an overwhelming majority of combatants in war. To make matters worse, argues Benatar, combat is not the only way being a male carries with it disadvantage with respect to violence. Males, too, are the victims of the vast majority of other types of aggression and violence (p. 31). The exception, predictably, is sexual assault. But regarding sexual assault, men suffer the disadvantage of having their accusations of sexual assault taken lightly, and sometimes even ignored completely (pp. 31, 37-41). And that is, for male victims of sexual assault, a significant disadvantage.

Benatar also makes the surprising case that, in most Western democracies, males suffer educational disadvantage. He does *not* thereby deny the possibility that females still suffer educational disadvantage, nor does he take a side on which sex currently suffers greater educational disadvantage. He needs only to show that it is not the case that “Girls [currently] suffer all (or almost all) the disadvantages” with respect to education (p. 47). To make this case, which he admits is still controversial, Benatar points to, among other things, the fact that “a greater proportion of females than males have enrolled in college every year since 1982” and the fact that men constitute the vast majority of high school dropouts (pp. 48, 47). Benatar claims that males suffer other sorts of disadvantage as well, from greater rates of incarceration and suicide, to challenges regarding custody battles, emphasizing along the way that his account of male disadvantage, detailed as it is, is far from exhaustive (pp. 61, 260). Benatar is careful throughout to keep in mind that disadvantage suffered on the basis of sex does not wrongful discrimination make.

Accordingly, he next argues that at least some of the disadvantage males suffer is a result of societal or cultural beliefs about males, beliefs that are exaggerated at best, and factually mistaken at worst. Among these beliefs, count those, defended prominently by Kingsley Browne, that argue that the practice of conscripting only males is justified because sex serves as a reliable proxy for selecting the best combatants (p. 103). Count also those beliefs that are invoked to justify the fact that we do not take seriously the charges of male victims of sexual assault, because men are sexually “more voracious” than women (p. 83). Given the questionable status of such beliefs and their incapacity to generate normative conclusions one way or another, their invocation as a justification for the differential treatment of men and women constitutes a form of sexism, or at least wrongful discrimination on the basis of sex (pp. 77, 102). That the differential treatment of males is often justified by appeal to claims about the differences between men and women constitutes sexism, precisely because these beliefs are culturally pervasive and mutually reinforcing, such that the differences they describe are, plausibly, largely the result of the beliefs themselves. Many of

them are analogous to the sorts of beliefs that were taken to justify the exclusion of women from the workplace and from higher education in years past.

Benatar is careful to emphasize that discrimination need not be explicit. Sometimes, he writes, “discrimination is explicit: men but not women are forced into the military or into combat; the law permits the hitting of boys, but not girls; males are overtly targeted for violence but females are spared. Sometimes, however, the contribution that discrimination makes to disadvantage is less direct . . . For example, people hold various prejudices about men . . . unconsciously . . . [that] contribute to treating men in ways that cause disadvantage” (p. 163). The lesson here is that discrimination is often hard to detect and that it often occurs in more or less normal social contexts as a result of factors that are not attributable to anyone in particular.

Despite careful argumentation, Benatar does not always succeed in making the transition from disadvantage to wrongful discrimination. For example, Benatar claims that males are the victims of most violent crimes (pp. 32, 122). While this is surely right on the evidence, there is nothing here to suggest that the statistical disparity between male and female victimhood is linked to wrongful discrimination against men. It is not clear that, regarding non-gender-related violent crimes like murder and assault, the victim’s sex is a factor in determining who will become a victim of such crimes. (Notice also that the two categories of violent crime that do seem, on the face of it, to be gender-related, sexual assault and domestic violence, are the two types of violent crimes of which women, not men, are the main victims.) Benatar might claim that the statistical difference in victimhood with respect to more generic types of violence is an instance of the sort of disadvantage that results from indirect discrimination. Perhaps males, due largely to cultural beliefs about males, are pushed to join gangs, or are pushed into other dangerous activities that are largely associated with violent crime. Benatar *could* go this way, but he does not here provide any evidence for believing that this sort of discrimination, however indirect, is what explains the fact that males are much more frequently the victims of violent crime. To the extent that the transition from disadvantage to wrongful discrimination is not made, there is a lacuna (albeit not an unfillable one) in his argument.

Nevertheless, to achieve his goal, that is, to convince us that males sometimes suffer disadvantage as a result of sexism, he need not succeed in showing that *all* of the types of disadvantage he outlines, in the end, constitute sexism. That is, even if we reject some of his arguments as insufficient to demonstrate that certain disadvantages are instantiations of sexism-caused disadvantages, we can still accept the more modest conclusion that *some* of the disadvantages men suffer result from sexism.

Having demonstrated that males suffer disadvantage on the basis of their sex and that at least some such disadvantage is wrongful, Benatar finally considers the possibility that males might, as a result of the second sexism, be deserving of affirmative action. First, Benatar distinguishes between “equal opportunity affirmative action,” which aims “to ensure that opportunities are genuinely equal,” and preference-based affirmative action, which essentially “involve[s] some kind of preference based on a person’s sex” (pp. 214, 215). While affirmative action of the equal opportunity variety is perfectly acceptable, indeed, even required, the preference-based variety does not fare so well on analysis. He argues that to give preference to some on the basis of their sex is an inappropriate response to sexism, whether that sexism is of the first or second variety. He considers two common arguments in favor of preference-based affirmative action, ultimately rejecting each in turn. The arguments he considers are the argument from compensatory justice, which he deems the “rectifying Injustice” argument (p. 215) and the argument from consequentialism (p. 228). Neither is successful in ridding affirmative action of what about it is most unpalatable about its practice, namely, the fact that it institutionalizes sex-based discrimination. Each undermines the purpose of the hiring and admission processes, which serve the important societal function of resource allocation. But Benatar is far from advocating a do-nothing attitude with regard to sex-

ism, whether of the first or second brand.

Benatar argues that the number one thing we can do to eliminate the disadvantage that results from the second sexism (and, indeed, sexism more generally), is to take such disadvantage seriously. We ought to recognize it where it exists and employ equal opportunity based affirmative action to decrease the disadvantage that follows from such discrimination. We should stop the foolishness that is based on a race to greater victimhood and recognize that our boys and our girls, our men and our women, are all likely disadvantaged, to some extent, unnecessarily on the basis of their sex (p. 246). There is no prize for being worse off in this regard, and a thoroughgoing commitment to equity requires that we take all such wrongful discrimination quite seriously, no matter who the victims turn out to be. Benatar's analysis brings much needed clarity to contemporary debates in gender studies, whose discourse runs the risk of becoming stagnant and dogmatic against a constantly changing social backdrop. Benatar does well to remind us that it is not only females who are constrained and disadvantaged by the roles that they have been socially encouraged to take up.

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